

Perfecting Holiness (2 Corinthians 6:1–7:1)

By Pastor Jeff Alexander (3/12/2023)

Introduction

In this letter Paul continued his exhortation for the Corinthian church to continue to adhere to the principles he taught them in the beginning, the things they learned when they first became followers of Christ. The concern of the apostle is that they had not been consistent in the faith, having compromised important practices and entertained false teachers (Judaizers). Sadly, their compromises were born out of a lack of understanding of Christian liberty and love. This allowed for their toleration of evil, an evil not even tolerated among their pagan neighbors. They even boasted of their toleration (1 Corinthians 5:6).

These failures led to disruption and division, damaging the testimony of the church. Reports came to Paul about these serious problems, which he sought to deal with in his first epistle to them. Happy that they had received this correction in a proper spirit, Paul then sought to get them to disassociate from the Judaizers who were worming their way into the church. To gain influence, these false teachers sought to overthrow Paul's influence by destroying his character. However, Paul reminded them, "*What we are is known to God, and I hope it is known also to your conscience*" (2 Corinthians 5:11).

The use of the word *appeal* in verse 20 would be better translated *plea*, as used in legal proceedings describing the work of an advocate or attorney before the court. God was making His *plea* through the apostles. The noun form of the term is used of the Holy Spirit (John 14:7). The Holy Spirit is a *pleader*, a *parakletos* (translated *Helper* or *Comforter*) coming alongside the believer to enable his true biblical walk.

So, what was the plea here? It is not to receive the grace of God in vain—to no purpose (6:1). Salvation is a process of restoration requiring the cleansing of defilements and "*perfecting holiness in the fear of God*" (7:1), a life-long process to prepare believers for glory (Hebrews 12:14). True believers are to be holy and happy, willing, submissive, and obedient followers of the lord Jesus Christ for the glory of God. Chapter 5 closed with an explanation: "*That in him we might become the righteousness of God*. This is a process that takes a daily pursuit, ending only when we die or when Jesus comes.

I. A Passionate Plea for Reconciliation (5:20)

1. In these chapters, Paul pleads with the church not to trust the false teachers who sought to wreck Paul and his ministry in order to propagate their own doctrine. They professed to have received Paul's gospel, but their tolerating the false teachers was putting their profession in jeopardy, not that they would lose their salvation but that their progress in holiness would be stifled. In verse 2, Paul cited the promise of "*a day of salvation*" (Isaiah 49:8). It is the *period* (the age of grace) between the first and second comings of Christ, a period of God's favor or grace because of the finished work of Christ.

This plea also contains a note of urgency because *that day will end*. There are two days for believers—the day of salvation and the day of the Lord or judgment (5:10).

- a. *Now* is the day of salvation. Paul pleads the urgency of it: "*Now is the favorable time*" when the gospel is to be preached in all the world, the time God is taking a people out of the world for His name. However, in the context of this passage, Paul is urging those who have received the gospel to progress in *holiness*—separation of all that is worldly and displeasing to God.
- b. Believers are to live out their salvation in light of the day of the Lord, the day when the same Savior, Jesus, will judge everyone at the end of the age (5:10; Acts 17:31). The importance of improving one's spiritual standing in the day of salvation is exemplified by Paul, as noted in the next point.

2. Paul wrote about himself to show an example of true holiness. He also demonstrated that his fear of God enabled him to put no obstacle in anyone's way (6:3, 4). As a servant of God, he had to be transparent in order not to hinder the gospel in any way, but to walk carefully, prudently, and inoffensively before all, Jew and Gentile alike. Thus Paul enumerates his passion in three areas: (1) great endurance, (2) good principles, and (3) proper response to honor and dishonor.

Paul concluded with an urgent plea to the Corinthians: "*We have spoken freely to you, Corinthians; our heart is wide open* [in other words, we are an open book]. *You are not restricted by us* [your spiritual progress is not endangered by us] *but you are restricted in your own affections* [literally, bowels, the seat of the tender affections, especially kindness, benevolence, and compassion], *In return (I speak as to children) widen your hearts also*" (vv. 11–13).

II. The Duty of Believers in the Day of Salvation (6:14–7:1)

1. After showing his tender affection, even that of a father to his children, Paul gives a strong command to stop being unequally yoked with unbelievers. The verse could be translated, "*Stop being unequally yoked with unbelievers.*" *To be yoked* means to be aligned in spirit. Here Paul is showing the incongruity of their present behavior. To support the command, Paul cited a number of incongruities.
2. The reason for the strong command is stated after asking, "*What agreement has the temple of God with idols?*" The church is the temple of God. Paul had already informed the church of their high spiritual status in his first epistle to them (1 Corinthians 3:16, 17; 6:19, 20). Paul again cites the OT (Leviticus 26:12 and Isaiah 52:11) that plainly declares the temple is the chosen dwelling place of God. For the people of God to dwell with God, they must be *holy*, separated from all that is unholy. If His people observe this separation, He will be a Father to them. What glorious promises are these (Revelation 21:3, 4)!
3. The duty of the church is given (7:1). Note *promises*, not threats, are used to provoke compliance. Believers are called upon to cleanse themselves from defilement. God grants His people the anticipation of the joy of seeing His face and dwelling with Him forever. Is this not worth all the effort the Scripture demands of His people to complete the reconciliation (full restoration)? Paul assures the believer of God's provision for this (Romans 7:18, 19, 24; Romans 8:2–7).

Let us bring to completion holiness in the fear of God.